

Oral History Newark Library

Interviewee: Marc Levin

Interviewer: Robert Curvin

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*Marc Levin:* Okay, so I'm Mark Levin, the executive producer and director of Brick City, filmmaker and also family friend of Mr. Bob Curvin.

*Robert Curvin:* Let's start by just asking you how Brick City happened. And if you could say a little bit about the lead up to the concept. And then a little bit about how have you made it happen.

*Marc Levin:* Okay? I would say there're two different sides. One was rather unusual. I got a phone call right in this office from a bunch of bloods gang members in Newark, who said that we'd like to meet with you. Of course, I was a little suspicious, you know, what are bloods wanting to meet with me for? I've done a number of films, especially gang war banging in Little Rock that are in the game world. So, I was hoping it wasn't a complaint about we didn't like this or that. And we talked a little and then they told me they wanted to do their own documentary about their life because they didn't think the media portrayed it accurately and they wanted to know if I would consider being a creative consultant. Well, I was kind of taken aback by you know, a bunch of bloods want a creative consultant on their film. Interesting. So, I did go out to Newark, and I met with them with my partner, Mark Benjamin, who had been working a little with them. And they were not thugged out. You know, just tough guys. It was the three, four gentlemen young men that were pretty articulate, and had a kind of interesting vision of what they wanted to do. And they knew a lot about my work. They knew a lot about Slam Bang in Little Rock, Thug Life in DC.

They also knew I lived in Maplewood. And they said to me, you know, we call it Maplehood. I'd never heard the term Maplehood I kind of looked at them like what and they said, you know, you need to go by your alma mater Columbia High School and look at the top of the tower you know where it says CHS and you're gonna see to see it crossed out. And I was like, wait a second, you telling me some blood climbed up the tower and Columbia high and cross the sea out? Because that's for Crips and the Bloods don't like the Crips. And they all started nodding. And I said, you mean there're Bloods and Crips in Columbia High School? And then they said, you know, you've done these films all over the world, and you know, all over our country. But you don't know what's happening right in your own backyard where you grew up,

you need to come home mark, that line was really the beginning of one side of this project, because that kind of haunted me. In fact, I told Mark Benjamin, when we left, I said, I can't get that out of my mind that these kids are saying, you know, you don't even know what's happening right here where you grew up. The other side was, for a while, I had ended up at one point doing a television series, a dramatic TV series for the Showtime cable network called Street Time, about parolees and federal parole officers. Terrence Howard was in it, Rob Moreau, you know, it had some big TV names. And that got me kind of hooked on the series thing. And we came out the same, we ran head-to-head against the Wire, we run Showtime, they run on HBO, and the Shield was another show. So, I kind of got into studying those. And I knew nothing about the television series business. But this kind of got me hooked on it. And I started thinking, you know, knowing the reality world also, isn't there a way that we could do take the documentary experience and the now reality TV taking over the TV landscape, and kind of fuse that with what I learned? I ended up being- I directed the pilot a street time, and then I ended up becoming what's called in the business, the show runner running the whole series. The second season. And I kept thinking, you know, we call it like novelistic storytelling, parallel stories in the Wire. You know, you had the street, and you had the police. We had the parole office, and then the parolees' lives, are they going to go straight? Or are they going to go back to crime? And I started thinking, wouldn't it be fascinating if you could find a real-world community where I could use my documentary skills, reality TV, everybody wants a new element of it. And what I learned in the dramatic world to kind of tell the story, and the story that most interested me was a community that is trying to change.

Now this was before Obama's campaign really took off and change became obviously the buzzword for his campaign and for you know, the whole year and- but that was- those were the elements that were there. I was looking at a number of places really, I'd gone down to Washington going to Philadelphia looking for a number of possible communities where you could get access, so when the bloods called and said, you know, you need to come home, I was like, wow, this is amazing. I met with Peter Shapiro who I went to high school with and was the first Essex County executive and, you know, started realizing, wow, you know, I know a lot of people it's true. In this area, I met Cory, just at the opening of Street Fight, you know, when- when that movie was made, and he was a city Councilman. I knew some of the people involved in the making of the film, and, you know, was very moved by the movie thought it was fantastic. And certainly, he was a great character. But so, we met with him and said, you know, we are kind of dealing with some of the rougher elements of this community. But we have a bigger idea in mind. What was so interesting is he got it immediately. And he said, have you ever read the book prayer for a city, and I had never heard of the book, but it was

written by Buzz Bissinger who ended up writing Friday Night Lights, and just wrote the book on LeBron James. And he was at the time in the early 90s, a reporter at The Philadelphia Inquirer. And when Ed Rendell became mayor of Philadelphia, he gave buzz, unprecedented access to City Hall his first year, and that was you know, the crack epidemic and all of these urban problems. But the book wasn't just a portrait of Ed Rendell it was he had, you know, six or seven other characters like a teacher or someone that worked in the port, the longshoreman, someone in law enforcement in the courts. And he drew this composite portrait of Philadelphia in the early 90s. And, and so to Cory's credit, because he knew that he is media savvy, and he loves the media, and he's a movie freak. But that some critics have, you know, said you're all media, no substance. So, it was we can't just do a movie about you. And we weren't interested, that had already been done. But you could be a character like in Prayer for a City in a more of a tapestry, a mosaic, where we picked a variety of characters who are on the front line of trying to make a change in their life, in their family, in their neighborhood, in this city. And once I read the book, I was like, boy, you hit you hit it right on the nose. This is exactly because he said you want to make a TV version of a prayer for a city. That's my favorite book. So, we read it and said, You're absolutely right. This is what we want to do. And, you know, after obviously, months of negotiation, and also the triple homicide, the horror of 2007, I think was, in a way a bonding experience. We were out there on our own dime, as we were getting to know everybody. And that horror happened. And that was obviously a test for him, for McCarthy, for the whole community. And I think they got a sense of who we were, you know, in the middle of a crisis, it shows where people are at. And they as just as we took that book, we gave Cory and his whole team, a whole bunch of our films from Bill Moyers to Slam, to you know, so they could see, and they had some sense who we were. So that's how it started.

*Robert Curvin:* Let me ask you what I think is for me the critical question, in an enterprise like this, who gets to make key editorial decisions about the storyline, as well as the accuracy of certain interpretations that are put before the audience.

*Marc Levin:* Well, that that is the question, of course, that immediately came up in City Hall, but it came up with the bloods also came up with every group that you can imagine who's going to have editorial control who's going to have final cut. So, we had to be quite blunt, not you. The mayor is not going to have final cut. The bloods aren't going to have final cut, the police department's not gonna have final cut. And basically, from a legal point of view, we don't even have Final Cut Sundance's Final Cut. In other words, Sundance, whoever you do the deal with now we were negotiating with but if we had done it for HBO, or Showtime, they make the final decisions. Now, of course, we have tremendous input into that as the filmmakers. And that's why you have to have

I guess, the most accurate way to say is there have to be kind of understandings that go beyond legalities of what a contract says, you know, because as I say, And look, that doesn't mean we don't have fights with the network, you know, and we do, you know, and battles, and you can imagine the network, any network is wants to make an award winning piece of work, you know, that's prestige, but they want people to watch it. That's the business they're in.

So, the pressure from them is always going to be, you know, how do we get an audience keep an audience, you know, but the idea of which is the tagline for this series, change comes hard. That was as a theme. Every everybody's signed off on that as a theme. And I can tell you this, honestly, that we went and pitched it to a lot of places that we've worked with. And, you know, you talk about Newark. Yeah, it's got a charismatic mayor, you know, change, as I said, we were pitching this in the fall of 2007. That was before Obama had emerged, you know, as a real possibility, you know, the normal reaction, quite honestly, was what else you got to pitch? You know, who the hell is interested in that, you know, C span, you know, why don't you watch C span, if you're interested in political, social, you know, change or how it really works, you know, it's either going to be a bore, that no one would want to watch, or, you know, it's going to be too black or whatever. So, but going to your question, is Sundance is Final Cut.

But obviously, we have, you know, we really shaped the show, and to have what I would call an open dialogue, which is that, not that you, City Hall, or you Garry McCarthy, or you Jaden creep, or any of the characters are ever going to be able to tell us what's in or out. But if you are willing to open your lives, your offices, your city, we have to be willing to do the same, we have to be willing to show an openness. In other words, unlike, I guess, you would say, a classic journalistic enterprise, which is just, you know, you'll see the finished product. And then you'll either like it or not, we realized, and, you know, throughout the years of working in this field, that, hey, if you're going to ask people to trust you, you know, you've got to show that you trust them. And so what I would say is that this shop where you are right now, was we opened it in a way that we might not, you know, normally so that there so so people off the record, could see what's happening and could have a sense of who we are, have a sense of how this was going and be involved in a collaborative dialogue with us about and obviously, the dialogue focused on the negative versus the positive.

And as we the dialectic that you know, this simple, you know, fear versus hope. You know, if you want to put it, you know, that simple, or as somebody who responded to the series said, I think I'm addicted to the pain and the inspiration that is Brick City that was like a Twitter from a kid. But yes, there

is pain, there is the hard-core reality of the tragedies and all the difficulties that every city faces, not Newark alone. And there are triumphs and characters, you know, who are trying to move the ball forward, how you balance those two things, was a focus of a lot of discussion. But I will say this, because we made a trailer. And that discussion started right then, when Cory's first reaction when he saw the trailer was, this is *Boys in the Hood*, too. You know, like, what's going on here? And my partner was, you know, kind of taken aback and I said, no, no, this is good. We need to have this discussion, right from the top, you know, that that quarry needs to understand we're not doing a chamber of commerce film. We're not doing a survey. We're not doing a history of Newark.

We're doing a television show, you know, and we want people to watch this now. We feel that we can seed enough in this so that people will become engaged in how do you affect change in your life and your community's life and seeing people literally involved in that enterprise and hopefully inspiring some people and moving some people. But we were convinced, and I remain convinced that if it was whitewashed or too sanitized or just focused on the positive Not only wouldn't people not watch it, but it would ring false. It would not, you know, it would not compel people to really think these things through. Now the wire was totally bleak. The wire was and I thought it was one of the greatest TV shows ever and one of the most authentic and again presenting to America the forgotten story that was not on the agenda at all of urban America. And what do we do about it? Nobody was even talking about it the six years the wire was on. But that was the disintegration of. So we felt that had been done. Obviously, we've been compared as the real wire. But if you look at our characters compared to the characters in the wire, all our main characters and supporting characters are committed to trying to make a difference in a change, they may fail. They may fall short.

*Robert Curvin:* This is I think exactly the point. So, where I think you will find an enormous amount of debate, resentment, even about what-what happened, actually, the outcome is, because for someone who really is interested in change, it is very hard to see this as an effort to even get close to the notion of change in new urban contexts. And I guess I'm a little befuddled as to why you think this is so much about, you know-

*Marc Levin:* Well, I'll give you- I'll give you why- I'll give you I mean. I think what's interesting, Bob, is that I- believe me, we've faced the criticism, you can imagine going back to Newark, and you know, you feel this way and many others we know do start ledger did the front-page article on the middle class. You know, we've met with a lot of the parties that feel they were ignored that they were you know, so believe me, we've heard it, and I respect it, but I have to respectfully disagree obviously, first of all, what I would say is the most

interesting thing is outside of Newark this film and you know, we'll send you the press package on it, you can read the critics, you can read the emails, you can read the Twitters, you know, if you say the same thing after that, I'd be- I'd be you know, very curious, because the reception this is gotten has been the reason they're asking us to do a second season possibly. It's has been so overwhelming, so positive, and it has moved and inspired so many people, people saying how do I get involved? How can I become part of Newark's story? How- what can I do to help Newark? I wish we had a mayor like this guy, this guy McCarthy, how do we bring them to our city? You know, how do we lower crime like they're lowering crime? So, in Newark, the sectarian differences that are part of the political history that you're doing, they were all blown, you know, and amplified to, you know, this Brick City just with like an x ray. Everybody that doesn't like Cory Booker, you know, this was the Cory Booker show. This was an infomercial for how great Cory Booker is. The-

*Robert Cruvin:* I would agree with that, by the way. I don't see that as a negative, the guy is brilliant and has a deep interest in promoting his vision which I think he did very well.

*Marc Levin:* Right. I would agree. But I'm saying there are a lot of people that feel it was just an infomercial for Cory Booker. Of course, you know, we had to say, well, you know, what would Ras Baraka be doing in it? If this was just a simple infomercial for the Cory Booker and believe me, there were people in city hall that were not happy that Ras Baraka was such a heroic character, and the Hispanic community was very upset, because there were no Hispanics in it. And they have every reason, but at the same time, it's not a survey. It's a TV show. If we do a second season, a third season, there are many stories, but this wasn't just going to be we walk into one ward, and you know, and this was, you know, whose lives in this ward and this was who lives in this ward. This was a TV show, the- the middle class-

*Robert Curvin:* Let me ask you this because- does the TV show have any responsibility?-

*Marc Levin:* I think it does.

*Robert Curvin:* To its citizens. I mean, you keep using it as a defense. That's not the whole story.

*Marc Levin:* No, no. I am saying that, you know, to judge you know, to your- your judgement, the film or the series is not a necessarily an effective way to communicate to people what change means in an urban community, I have to differ with you because of all the feedback that we've gotten. And that the most contentious feedback, what I'm saying is in Newark, because of all these differences, you step outside Newark. I mean, come on Fenty hosted it in Washington, you know, we're being invited the other cities, I mean, you

know, but I'll just show you what people are saying. You see what they're saying. And you compare it to what's on television. That's my point of saying a television show, compare it to what's on television.

*Robert Curvin:* I say, you know, as I said to you, when I wrote to you, I think that there are elements of it that are absolutely penetrating, brilliant, incisive, about life in general. The stuff on the police is not only beautifully photographed, but great photography and the whole thing. But there's also this, you take you take the storyline about the conflict between McCarthy and Campos, right. You don't tell the whole story. That's true. And so, what's- what is, I mean, can't- is that perfectly okay?

*Marc Levin:* Well, this is what I would say about that, I mean, if you know the whole story, I can't wait to read it. Because, as Garry said, on camera in episode four, even those in Newark don't know exactly what's happening. We didn't have access to the whole story. We tried as hard as we could, to get the whole story. We were not allowed to get the whole story. And that's possible that, that that's the mindset, right. And I'm willing to accept that that was not the whole story. But again, step outside, you know, and look at what again, change comes hard, what our point was, in trying to make any sense of the limited access that we had, is, here's a guy Garry McCarthy, New Yorker obviously brought in top cop, you know, definitely, you know, doing a good job against all the odds. And then from the inside, there is resentment, jealousy, and a coup. Now for, again, the national audience. That's, and that in the end, the mayor comes down on his side. For a national audience, that to the bigger theme of change comes hard that even though you get these numbers, you're making progress, you think there aren't going to be people that are going to try to take you down from the inside.

If we could just communicate that we feel that's a success. But I agree, and I can't wait to read your book, because we the most infuriating day of production was the day that for 12 hours, there were lawyers from all the different groups meeting and we were told every 15 minutes, you know, we're gonna let you guys in, we're gonna give you so that you can really understand what this is all about. And of course, each time it was no, not now, not now. We stood out there, we almost smashed the door down. But our frustration because we didn't really understand. And I can't wait to try to read because I actually liked Campos just as a guy. So, who was behind this, and we knew there was a union and there was a legal thing, but it- it got so convoluted, and nobody ever was able to make or at least give us access. So, I'm curious. But again, my point is you might be right about the mayor would have looked worse. And that's, I think, a very valid point. But for us big story change comes hard, which is what Garry McCarthy says in that show, is that even when you're doing the job, you're an outsider, you're white, whatever it is,

there are politics. This is the real this is how hard it is. Nobody's sitting there just patting you on the back and saying, wow, Garry, so that was you know, that was our, you know, that was our story point.

*Robert Curvin:* So, Forrest Whitaker uses the line. This is about people trying to live the American dream. I find that particularly hard to, to accept. [chuckle] I mean, I think it's, I mean even if I said okay, forget all criticism and about change, but the American dream?

*Marc Levin:* Yeah, I didn't write that. I don't know where- no, I didn't write that. I don't know where that came from. I don't know if he wrote that I am assuming Sundance, you know, wrote that in this in their introductions in the introductions to the show, I wouldn't use that. But let's talk about Jaden creek for a second, because that's been obviously a source of a lot of discussion. And they emerged, just, naturally, in other words, when we sold this show, we didn't know them. And we went to one of those gang interface summits. And we saw, and obviously, she had tremendous charisma, this idea of a blood in the crib, you know, it's kind of West Side Story thing.

And we saw that, you know, she was working with some of these young women that were at risk. So we were taken, and remember that this story started with some bloods approaching us, and she knew some of those people. So that was intriguing. We didn't know where it would go. But obviously, we followed it, she emerged as a major character, you know, as it went on. And I think that her story, to me is about change. She is trying. But I'm saying to actually see someone when you say, you know, to actually, you see a mayor trying to change the city, you see a police director, you know, trying to change the police department and crime in the city and succeeding, you know, and you see a young woman who could easily be part of that problem. And it is the first to admit that she has been part of that problem, and the ghost from that comeback.

But I think authentically, and that's a judgment we have to make, obviously, and we've been around, you know, there are a lot of scam artists, and there's a lot of, and even people try to change like with drinking or drugs, they relapsed, they fall back. But she, I feel that is part of the strength of this series, again, is that you're seeing it's not we're not telling you, you're witnessing it, you're witnessing a character who is struggling with it, and moves forward steps back at a time. And it's amazing how that has struck a chord with so many people. Oh, absolutely. But you know, going to your point, though, of it doesn't really speak to change in the urban arena. That's why I'm disagreeing with you. I'm saying the three main characters in this series, Cory Booker, trying with his media skills, his telegenic ability as the mayor to bring a different image and a different, let's just say, vibe, you know, to the city of Newark, whereas, you know, in your book, every mayor has been indicted,



you know, Garry McCarthy, trying to bring 21st century law enforcement to a notoriously corrupt and outdated and having some success, and we track that success. And that's part of why you see also the bodies and the horror, because that's what they're dealing with. And Jada, a young woman who, even in the first episode could have taken off, you know, and just said, Fuck this, I'm not, you know, going back to face that, but she doesn't want some counsel from some of the elders in the community that she respects that, you know, work on the street as activist. And we track her story. And so I'm saying that I feel that anybody who watches and gets involved with those characters, is discovering what how change comes hard in this community. And it's not just Newark.

*Robert Curvin:* Anybody that reached the age of 18 knows that this personal struggle people have for all kinds of reasons, is a certain kind of change that has to take place, but that is, to me, over here, when you talk about changing a city, that's a whole different kind of discussion, in my view. because Jada could be living in Melbourne, there are Jada's in Columbia High School.

*Marc Levin:* Absolutely.

*Robert Curvin:* But you wouldn't consider that a metaphor for changing.

*Marc Levin:* Oh, I would if placed in the right context. In other words, I think you're absolutely right. That's the point is her the universalism. Yeah, of what she's going through means that kids in Melbourne can watch it and actually relate to it. The difference though, she is a blood, you know, that's difference her past she's a felon. That's a difference. And when you say, you know, it's not fair to use her as a microcosm, no, no, no one person is obviously just as Cory is not, you know, or McCarthy. But the thing about Jada is, Bob, come on, you know, the unemployment rate, the poverty rate, the you know, and if- if you don't acknowledge that this gang thing is real, and that, you know, go to any of the high schools, you know, the- the quarterback was just shot in the head on Tuesday, you know, I mean, so the whole idea of the Wire, which we found so interesting, and I discovered in Street Time is if you can do what I guess would be called upstairs, downstairs or inside, outside inside City Hall, you know, in the police department and on the streets, that, you know, characters from the street level, and from the power center of a community, but with a common goal, which is just let's make this city safer. So, our kids can grow up in it.

*Robert Curvin:* Where was the [unclear]?

*Marc Levin:* City Hall and the police department.

*Robert Curvin:* What about Prudential?

*Marc Levin:* That's a good question. Very good question. The hardest nowhere to be seen. Well, no, that's not true. I mean, no, no, but we have Stefan Pryor. Mr.

Economic development. I would say that's the hardest thing to bring to the screen is how do you use economic development and capital as an engine to help your city? That's the toughest and why is it the toughest? Because those people are the ones that are the hardest to let you into the room. And believe me, we tried. And I'm we're still trying. Because, you know, what we did is we finally said, let's put the season one, public safety is the theme. That's what the mayor ran on. I'm going to lower the murder rate; I'm going to lower the shooting rate. That's why Garry McCarthy came in. I missed the top cop; I'll show you I can come into the toughest challenge. And Jaden Creep. two warring so called warring gangs together saying that's bullshit Red and Blue Bloods versus Crips, you know, out of a world that we associate with all the worst of this violence, also saying, we want to make a difference in our own lives and with other kids, you know, that are growing up in our community, you had a common theme. I agree with you. The money is where the action is, you know, how to show that is the greatest challenge of all. And I hope, you know, we could if we continue this-

*Robert Curvin:* In my view, if- it I just, and I've had this conversation with a few people. To me, Alan Levin would have found a way.

*Marc Levin:* He might have, look, he- you're right, my father-

*Robert Curvin:* This point about the importance, you know not that, you know, the people who run the major corporations are personally corrupt or, or even insensitive to the problems. But the dynamic between their role, and even Jaden Creep is, to me essential when understanding the fate of the city.

*Marc Levin:* I think that's a valid point. And I think it's, you know, one that I would agree isn't realized in these five hours, it's not believe me, it was discussed. And as I say, it's something that we will continue. But it's very hard to get access. Once you dealing with corporate, you know, you got 10 lawyers in the room. And everyone, you know, is saying this is our CEO, we're making a deal. Now get out of the room, you know, the real business is being discussed now. No, I- this is, you know, the ultimate you can do anything, but you go into the boardroom where the real deals are made. That's, it's- so I agree with you. And I think that that is, you know, a huge challenge. But it's funny you say that, because if you look at the other show we did that was just on HBO, That is about the economy. Yeah, we'll give you a copy. But that is about the economy. That's the whole- but I think good point, you know, valid point and any way you can help us in that we're more than open.

*Robert Curvin:* Okay, let me let me ask you this. You've been to a lot of places and a lot of different venues coming. What'd you think about Newark? What did you learn about the city? And how it- how it functions and what's different about it?

*Marc Levin:*

I think Newark is- it has a tremendous personality. I mean, that it's- it's got a cultural history. And so, whereas there are many cities, you know, hard for Baltimore, you know, Cleveland, I mean, you can go, you know, name so many cities that are facing similar problems to Newark. But I think that Newark does have a unique history. It has, there's a militancy that obviously, you know, you came up in and Amiri Baraka. So, there's a black power militancy that is interesting, you know, that still exists it I don't know how effective it is, you know, I mean, Amiri and his son Ross are in the middle of it, but it has a legacy, you know, that that is a little different than just appearing somewhere else. It has you know, Biggie, the jazz, you know, it has a backstory. And of course, at times, we wondered if we could ever weave that in and we tried, but it took us out of the moment, you know, and now, even like, what you're doing what, what is being discussed is because so many people have responded and because this thing was put up online on iTunes. And we did what they call webisodes, which were certain things that we couldn't fit into the series, but you know, kind of stood on their own.

We're discussing whether, you know, we have on the web, you know, something where there's a history and something where there's a backstory of musicians that came from and athletes, you know, just different things. But so, I think it has it has a rich history, and obviously I grew up with part of it, not only my parents, but half my high school, was born in Newark, and their parents went to week Weequahic High and the white flight, they came out to Maplewood, you know. So, I think that, you know, makes it unique. Being close to New York and being in the middle of everything, you know. I don't know- that's a two-way street. On one hand, it is exposed, and more people pass through it. I think that but on the other hand, the provincialism is unbelievable, you know, for a city that's only seven or eight miles from New York City. It's just unbelievable the provincialism, and people who've never even come to the city who live there, you know, and know nothing about New York. Its political history, obviously, you know, that's the Sopranos, New Jersey, you know, and that is something I as you know, kid, I've always been fascinated by New Jersey, the mafia, all that stuff. But, you know, we are, you know, you saw the Sunday Times magazine article, you know, New Jersey has a unique political history, and Newark has been the epicenter for it. Look, when these arrests happened we were, all again, you know, you talk about change. I mean, just that that nobody was dragged out of City Hall. Now, maybe there will be one or two people. But that that day that those 30 arrests happened, that nobody was dragged out of City Hall. I mean, come on, if you're talking about change, what's more dramatic change, when you know, every other administration, half the administration would have been dragged out? And yeah, no, I know, there were rumors, and we've heard those, and you know, but I'm just saying in that moment, you know, so and its potential. Come on, you look at our windows here. And obviously, I grew up in Jersey,

but you look across the river that is emerged in the last 10 or 15 years, I'm talking about Hoboken, New Jersey City, and the redevelopment of this entire waterfront, you know, and people that are work right in this office discovering, hey, maybe I'll move out to Jersey instead of Brooklyn, or instead of the Bronx, you know, there's more happening out there, the more opportunities so I think that Cory is right, in that he picked, you know, obviously grew up in suburban Jersey, but he picked he didn't pick Camden. You know, he didn't pick Trent and he picked Newark. It was it was it. It's universal, and then it has all the problems and obviously, since the rebellion riot, it has a reputation, you know, bad reputation, but that it has the potential and it has enough of a backstory, you know that it is not a cultural wasteland that has a rich cultural history and political history.

*Robert Curvin:* By the way, you'll enjoy this story. And when the government was changed in the mid-50s, a guy named Leo Karlin became the first mayor under this new government. And after his first term, he went to New York and found this police guy named James Weldon, who came into New York and completely turned the police department upside down, started closing down gambling joints. And he just really went on a great reform rampage through the city. And in 1962, when Addonizio ran, right. The mob came out in great force with money as anything he needed to get this guy Weldon out of town.

*Marc Levin:* I got to ask Gary, if he knows that story.

*Robert Curvin:* Well, he may actually. I wrote a little memo about a year ago for Stephen. And I had a panel that I was on with Stephen, I gave it to Stephen. He said he keeps it on his desk. But it was, it's a very fascinating book. In some ways, there was a whole lot of other stuff about what was going on. And then which is so similar to what, what is going on. Now, this period of great hope, but even- but even then, the out migration was really picking up Jews were leaving the Irish were leaving, and so on. And Karlin lost, partly because the demographics have changed. He was in big trouble, because he had a great police director, who really changed the police.

*Marc Levin:* Well, that's gonna be obviously an interesting, you know, if Korea's reelected, you know whether Gary stays around. I mean, that will be an interesting storyline.

*Robert Curvin:* One of the things that fascinates me- again, I think this guy, not only is he extremely talented, but he also- Gibson to me failed, because he had no vision. Sharpe failed, because he had no integrity. Ultimately, Cory's got vision. And I think he's got integrity. But he's not been able to win a single local community election since he's been elected. He hasn't been able to win a single district race in the South Ward or Central Ward, or anywhere, and he's gonna win next year. But how do you actually govern? Does that mean that-

*Marc Levin:*

I think that's I think that's a great question for and I would say, you know, if we go ahead and do that, that's got to be part of the frame, you know, is to try to set up in some way that even if he wins reelection, like you say, which obviously, most people think he will, but that politically, just as in the right, right. That's if they stay together, you know, because who knows, you know, with him? I'm pretty sure. But like you say, like, take the south ward. You know, if Ras runs against Oscar James, which seems to be happening, I think that's a great question. And I think that's, but again, look, what's going to happen nationally, you know, in other words, that Obama, obviously, and we see the struggle, you know, just to get health care. And we know, there'll be there always is historically a backlash, you know, come the midterm elections. Look, I think one of the things that surprised me most about Korea and his relationship to some of the citizens in Newark is the vitriol against him. Because I'd say, look, if you don't, you know, he's a showman, or, you know, he's not giving you the patronage that sharp Did you know, he's not a, you know, a newer guy, you know, but still, he's, I think you're right. He's got vision. He's got integrity, and he is committed, he's committed. In other words, I think it's not fake. You know, obviously, he's a politician. But I mean, that many times I said to him, how do you put up with it? I just walk away. You know, you know, who wants to put up with this? You know, he's got an evangelical streak, which is religious, his own parents, their involvement in the civil rights movement. There is something in him. I'm just saying it's about court. It's about it's about both, but it's about Cory but what I say to his critics, like Mary and Ross is, it's like, you know, how can you hate the guy I can see you say what his weaknesses are, you know, and I can see you you know, saying this should be this way or that but hated the vitriol you know, he's a white racist Negro and this kind of bullshit and you know, the Jews control them and I'm like, come on. On grow up, and why don't you use them? In other words, he's, he's a great showman for your city that he has a talent, whether it's on Conan, whether it's an art series, so you guys the opposition or the more militant or the Newark, you know, locals, you know, you need to figure out how do you make that work for you, instead of just, you know, you look ridiculous, you know, when it's just you're whining, and, you know, we hate this guy. So, but it's shocking, some of the vitriol, you know, that is just personally, you know, directed at him.

*Robert Curvin:*

Well, I don't find it unusual, frankly, I think that you would have found the same vitriol toward Sharp in certain quarters. And not toward Gibson, because he had this racist white opposition that kept him legitimate. And so it's a little different. But Newark plays hard. And they don't play fair necessarily, either. It's really tough, tough city. And, and this is just about a conversation. It seems to me that Cory hasn't figured out yet how you manage the necessity to rely very heavily on outside talent is a necessity, right in Newark with also the need to assure local people that they're part of exactly he has done. I've given

them an F on that frankly. And that until he figures that out. He even when he wins next year-

*Marc Levin:* I agree. And I hope that someone or you are someone we- you know, we need that laid out at the beginning of a second season. Because you know, in the scene in the circus scene, where he looks at the tightrope, that's exactly what I see. In other words, he's on that tightrope, and he's walking that and you're right, he has to balance and that could be his downfall, because I agree with you, he needs talent, you can't, you know, just can't be every patronage system. But if everybody feels locked out, whereas under- under Sharpe, they obviously-

*Robert Curvin:* I could show you that Gibson and Sharpe both relying on outside help as much as Cory as-

*Marc Levin:* Because the perception is that Sharpe obviously was you know, all Newark. You know, if- if you grew up in Newark, you-

*Robert Curvin:* I mean, the Key guy that did the arena form, he went to Washington and found them. And then he left and he went back and got him when the arena became real to come back and help them put the deal together. His- his business, his Corporation Counsel was from the Bronx. I mean, I can go through the name- it is not-

*Marc Levin:* Well, you're- you're right because that because boy that perception is so there that quarry is the one and sharp was you know all about local Newarkers.

*Robert Curvin:* I actually did a blog during the 2006 election for the Times with one of Damien Cave, where I pointed this out, you know, this stuff about [unclear] outside. It's just- it's a fiction. Well, it comes out of this- this history of, you know, isolation, insulation in Newark that shows up in many, many different ways.

*Marc Levin:* Well, it's also look, I mean, it's- it's- there's a class thing you know, I mean, when- when Amiri, I don't know when your interview- but I mean, you know, it's like Amiri, come on, just because the guy's a Rhodes Scholar, you're gonna hold that against him or all we went to Stanford, and that's where Condi Rice went. So, you're gonna hold that against him? I mean, you know, he comes from the suburban Ivy League.

*Robert Curvin:* I thought your use of Amiri in the series was a major contribution to Cory.

*Marc Levin:* To Cory, interesting, because they weren't too happy about it. Cory wasn't.

*Robert Curvin:* Well, for people who are looking at this in a much broader way. Amiri's performance in my view was so stupid. And it was so negative that it makes Cory look like a more reasons and thoughtful person.

*Marc Levin:* Interesting, interesting.

*Robert Curvin:* I mean, other than that, I mean, his- his place in the area was virtually, hit the nail.

*Marc Levin:* Oh, you mean Amiri. Oh, yeah, yeah. No Ras was, you know, is Ras is the character who emerges? Yeah. I mean, look that, you know that bit. I think we felt at the time when we were doing show two that show one was so positive, that you know, and we had to launch the series and look, Cory was a hook to sell the series, and to launch the series, but that we felt, you know, somebody better get up there. And just, you know, say, at least there are people that don't think this guy is God's gift to Newark. I wish that Amiri had been, you know, a little more thoughtful in his critique, we actually have an interesting scene between them that we did for the summer before, where the two of them were kind of, you know, at the anniversary of the rebellion. But again, you know, it just didn't fit into the flow. But so, you know, because I know, Amiri is, you know, he's a thoughtful guy, and interesting guy. And, you know, and this was his kind of rabble rabble rousing, you know, kind of rhetoric. But-

*Robert Curvin:* So, the bottom line is that you just think that this is a work that will help to move Newark forward.

*Marc Levin:* I think so.

*Robert Curvin:* You think so?

*Marc Levin:* I think so. I'm, you know, I know there are others that disagree, look, when we read the paper and sit and someone calls it civic pornography.

*Robert Curvin:* There is one point in the film where I think I've talked, I've heard this from my wife, also from other women. This story about the condoms and the [unclear]. People found that so base, right. So ugly, they have said, why would you put that in a film about- was that necessary?

*Marc Levin:* That's a good question. I think it's a good question.

*Robert Curvin:* It's such, it's such a, I mean, it's such an aberration. Makes it sound like you're talking about animal life.

*Marc Levin:* Well, look, I mean, I would agree that it's, it's it's a horrific thing. But you know, still, you know, when you see people dead on the street, you know, and people shot and killed. You know, that's the hardcore. That's, there's nothing worse than that, than people going around killing each other. You know. So, I mean, I agree, that's horrific, but it doesn't compare to these young girls being burnt up being shot being killed. And I think that it was, you know, why? I think there's two reasons why one we need, we wanted to introduce Todd Warren, you know, as a mentor, and as a character who says at the end of this, we're needed. And two, we wanted to show that Jada is wrestling with, you

know, what's my mission? You know? So, that happened to be the anecdote. I mean, we didn't, you know, choose it. But you know that- that where obviously Todd is saying, you know, this is why you're needed. You know, we included it, he told the story. You know, that was a tough call. And those are the kinds of things you're right, that sometimes the network would say, and that was I think, actually debated at the network. And-

*Robert Curvin:* You know that some of the times these things rest on very particular-

*Marc Levin:* Yeah yeah, no I think I think look, I think that's it's a valid point. And you know, I hear you that was certainly a disturbing image.

*Robert Curvin:* Tell me a little bit about Forest. Why did you need- why did you need him?

*Marc Levin:* Well, what happened was that I was involved with Forest on a fiction project on developing a television series. And the writer strike was in 2007. So, we had to kind of stop working on developing that project. And he was in New York, and he came up here and he just said, what else is happening? And that's when we were putting a trailer together for to try to go out and sell this Brick City concept after the triple homicides had happened, and he walked into the editing room and he was like, Whoa, I gotta get involved in this. This is- I've heard about this guy, Cory Booker, he, you know, he was aware who Cory is. He's involved in a bunch of political and social stuff. And I joke to him I said, I said Forest, you know, you're from West Coast. This is Newark. This is an East Coast story. You're, you know, you grew up in South Central. And he looked at me and he laughed. He said, Mark, give me a break, you know, South Central East St. Louis, Baltimore, Hartford, Newark, you know, this is this untold story of America. It's got to be told, and can I help? I said, short, you can help, call Redford. You know, I mean, we were trying to sell the series, you know, and as I say, this was not a easy sell. Newark, New Jersey is changing. Oh, great, you know, and he made it a lot easier to sell to say, you know, this is something I care about, this is something where I'm willing to help market and promote, you can use my name that was a big help. And, and, you know, to his credit, it wasn't just, you know, obviously, a lot of celebrities and stars do care, and they'll get put their name, but Forest, I would say, it's genuine. It's real. He came to Newark a number of times he met, you know, with almost every major character, no entourage, no bullshit, you know, into tough neighborhoods sitting down. He's real. So, I think it was heartfelt. And in this media universe that we live in, you know, to have an Academy Award winner on your side, it makes a big difference, you know, in terms of who's willing to write about it, pay attention to it, you know, and ultimately even buy it. So-

*Robert Curvin:* Well, my- my question really was, because I just felt that he's almost too earnest [?]. It comes out like he's spinning it, not giving Newark-



*Marc Levin:* Well, I want you to know that at first, when they told us they were going to write intros and outros for him, well we were furious, not because of him, obviously. But because we were like, what you're going to have to frame- you know, we've just busted our ass and spent a year and a half. And now you're gonna have somebody write some bullshit about what the show means. And doesn't mean. And you know- we were- we were furious. Because we saw it as defacing, you know, the purity of what we did. When I saw it, you know, I didn't react as strongly as you did. I was kind of surprised how earnest he was. I have to say, because we weren't there. You know, in other words, that was Sundance did- you know, the filming of his intro and outros? And, as I say, we didn't think they weren't necessarily, but when I saw it, I was like, look, again, hey, if a star gets people to turn their TV on, and means they're going to actually, you know, pay attention, you know, who might say, but it certainly wasn't part of the original deal with Forest because he said, Do you want me to narrate? You know, I was like, there's not going to be a narrator Forest, you know, I made it clear, you know, that we weren't looking for him on camera to walk in and say, Now I'm standing here, you know, he developed a relationship with the mayor on his own, you know, they communicate. But I, you know, again, you know, this is all, you know, this- the packaging, marketing, they took over, they wrote that stuff for him. And, you know, I haven't gotten, in other words, we see the feedback. So, I haven't seen that much negative feedback from that. But, you know, I hear what you're saying.

*Robert Curvin:* Very few people have looked at it the way that I had, because I'm a student. all the pre stuff and the post stuff. And I'm sure a lot of people are not looking at that.

*Marc Levin:* No, you have a truly unique perspective, which I think again, as I say, it's like, look, you know, Clement Price, and we've certainly respect you know, him as kind of the unofficial, you know, historian, and I think he felt upset he wasn't included in the series. I don't even know he his comments to New York Times were made before he saw the series. So that was just on hearsay, you know, but- but I'm just going by what I heard, I'm going to meet with him but- but I think that if this thing does continue- continue again, this is what I would say to you also and I say to everybody is how do you use this to get the bigger picture out here? This is in other words, yeah, the Crips- even the Crips came to us and they said we're fucking pissed off, why? Because the bloods got all the attention. I mean, you know, so they're like the bloods got all the attention. There's no you know, yeah, creeps in it, but you don't really show us you know, that we do things to besides gangbang. So, the same thing was like, hey, you know, fine, you can say you're not allowed in our neighborhood, you know, or- or Ramos say, you know, you're not allowed in the north ward or the East Ward can say, you know, or you can say, you know, we get what you doing, we're gonna show not only do we want you to show our community,

but we get what you're doing, we're gonna get you a character in a storyline that works on TV, because we know this isn't just let's see the nice things that- or the garden that's planted in the North Ward today, or the middle class family that's living in the East Ward, there has to be human drama, and there have to be people who are struggling to change. And that is human drama. You bring us that-

*Robert Curvin:* But they don't have to be gang members.

*Marc Levin:* No, no. And they can be middle class. Come on, people that lost their jobs, and what are they doing about their home? What are they? One- one of the things we're talking about right now is public health. In other words, public safety was a theme in that we use. And we tracked by, you know, the murders and the shootings, but public health if you want to take a more holistic approach to just the community, and how do you make it-

*Robert Curvin:* Notion that you'd have to have the corporate executives to give you that story.

*Marc Levin:* You may be right. And then now I'm open to trying to find other ways of telling that story.

*Robert Curvin:* Ways in which the story for the eye, you know, there are lots of other aspects that are as important, certainly race and housing policy and all of that, and the role of the state and so on. You can, you know, we're doing a film, I understand that. And things have to be very pointed, very clear, very sharp, because the average person is probably doing a number of other things while he's watching the show. But, and there wasn't, there was one point where I think, Jay, we mentioned the fact that there is unemployment and there's drought. But to me, it wasn't enough. It just didn't. It didn't rain, like we were really understanding the nature of the problem.

*Marc Levin:* You might, listen, you know, I'm with the one of the reasons that we're discussing, returning and really up for it is I think that we all feel that five hours, you know, there's no way we can do this, and show everything, and that we ourselves learned so much, and got familiar with Newark in a way that we feel that we could go for further and do better, and make it better. But on the from, from your perspective to everyone else's, it still has to be something people want to watch. And that doesn't mean, you know, in what, what, and I'll send you this stuff, you know, so that you can read some of the reactions, it doesn't mean that it has to be exploitive, or just tabloid, even though we're conditioned to, you know, er, in the emergency room, cops, you know, that's what most television is.

*Robert Curvin:* Nor does it have to promote Cory Booker.

*Marc Levin:* No, I think we, again- first season- that helped us sell I think we're much freer in a second season. And I think that what you said, if there's a way to- and

Ross would be the best way, but there may be other ways, Steve, you know, but if there's a way of framing this challenge, you know, that you just said and where he fails, you know, in how the South Ward or some of these local races are indicative of that weakness in his armor. And on his side, you know, people trying to figure out and accepting, you know, yeah, we might win, but, you know, this still is the challenge we face, how do we try to bridge that? That is something that could be very rich and is not just a puff piece. But yeah no, we're, we're trying to figure out, you know, how to do that. And like you say, it doesn't have to be gang. But if you're doing public safety, obviously, gangs are, are part of that, you know?

*Robert Curvin:* Well, let me let me make one final point. I just wanted to ask you about this supermarket scene, which comes off to me as so manipulative. I can't believe they did this. How could you have done that?

*Marc Levin:* I will only say it was not manipulative in that it happened. In other words, we were riding home with the mayor. i My partner was after, you know, the explosion of all those shootings in the city. And that just happened. That was just pure chance. That's pure chance. Absolutely. That was us. to the real thing, it was not staged. It was none of his handlers were there, his security guard is there, it was the one that whispers to the camera. Because we were going home with him, just we, you know, just from the press conference that you had seen earlier. And we wanted to just get him home thinking because hear all his worst fears come true. The city had blown up there were these people driving around the kid in front of central shot. So after a summer that didn't repeat, this summer of Oh, seven, they made it through the summer, horribly, in two weeks before the election, this violence erupts. And all over the state people are saying, so we finally convinced him to let us go home with you just to see you kind of alone, trying to figure out how you feel about all this. And he just said, let's stop at the supermarket. And so our cameraman got out just to basically get what we would call the banality of everyday life. You know, the mayor shopping, you know, he's gonna go home, have some pretzels, watch something on TV and try to decompress. That just happened. Honest to God, it was just chance, total chance and we didn't even know, as it was being shot until those people identified themselves exactly who they were. So we had to take that as he said, You know, God brought us together. It was just chance and karma. And you know, we've there-

*Robert Curvin:* You're gonna have a hard time making Newarkers, at least, believe that that's.

*Marc Levin:* Listen, I That's true. A lot of people Yeah, but that, but I can tell you, that is the real thing. That really happened. And Desire was not there. None of his handlers were there. You know, it was just him and his security guy. Yeah. And that was it. And no, and I felt in a way that that was Cory, that was really Cory without the spinmeisters awkward a little, and trying to make small talk

yet really willing, you know, in a situation like this to just put himself right in, you know, these people's face. So, you know, we felt- and then of course, when you go home with him, you know, and you just say I'm packing the groceries, that I have to say that this is me, but there are a few moments and that is one of them. The end of the film is one and the beginning of the whole series. It's the loneliness of the long-distance politician. In other words, for all the adulation and all that this is a guy who's alone, it's a lonely gig. And, you know, I certainly when I see that in the back three and show five, I feel that I feel you know, wow, he goes home there's no wife, there's no kids, there's no nothing and it's just all of that.

*Robert Curvin:* Do you have any insights on how and why and- this and relationship with Boteach?

*Marc Levin:* Shmueli I don't I really don't you know, I mean, I you know, just know they went to college together I mean, Shmueli is such a headcase you know, just-

*Robert Curvin:* You read the Wikipedia thing on him you'd say like, this is not the guy you want to hang out with.

*Marc Levin:* Right. Right, exactly.

*Robert Curvin:* And then if you go to his website you see Cory all over. I mean, some of this criticism is not-

*Marc Levin:* Oh, no, no, no, listen, I you know, his- look, I'm Jewish, Mark Benjamin are Jewish. And, you know, so of course, we joked when we first were negotiating with him, oh, yeah, the two Jews are gonna make the thing and of course, everybody's gonna say, again, you know, the Jews and we knew about Shmueli, now Schmuely was a pain in our ass. We had to, you know, try to convince Corey, get this fucking guy out of our face, you know, because he wanted a piece of the action, you know, but I don't- I have to, I really don't know. Except that, you know, it's like when you go to college together with somebody and you know, you came up together, you know, you got that. But beyond that, I yeah, I do not know what the story really with them is. I want to see, you know, I want you to feel that if we go to season two, that anyone you can direct me to and any ideas you have. And as I say, you know whether you put this together, etc. I mean, that's where I think the bottom line is that this can be good for Newark, is that Newarkers have to use it, make it work for them. Cory knows how to do that. Garry McCarthy knows how to do that. And Jaden Creep are fit trying to figure out whether they Do you know, but they're trying I mean, you know, they come with a lot less equipment, you know. But that's the challenge here. In other words, if you get this focus if you get a Forest Whitaker who's willing to be earnest, and you know, kind of position Newark as a- as Cory says, a laboratory for social trends, you know, urban transformation, how do you use that? Yeah, you can shut it down. Or

you can say we don't want to be part of it, or didn't tell the whole story? Or how can you use it? And when I saw the front-page article on the Star Ledger, of course, I smiled. I said, good. Now you're putting an article in your paper because we did this. You are putting the middle class on the front page. Good. Good for you. You know, where was it last year? You know-

*Robert Curvin:* Mark, I can bring you least three families that did this. For solid Newarkers, who have said, you know, if this is the way the mayor really feels the city ought to be used. There's no reason for me to live here. I don't I don't want to be a part of it. I, I would love to see a communication that you've seen that says, somebody says, I you know-

*Marc Levin:* I mean, I'm gonna send you you're gonna you and these three families can read reams of them. Yeah, reams of them. Because what I would say is, come on, you know what the triple homicide on the front page of every newspaper is, you know, or the corruption scandal in New Jersey. In other words, look at the coverage that you're going to say Brick City is why you want to leave? Well, that's what Yeah, well, that's, I'm just saying that's, that's that's what my response would be?

*Robert Curvin:* Well, maybe it's an accumulation of things, particularly very, very powerful. This is five nights. Yes, it is five nights. There, there has been nothing as lengthy and, in a sense, comprehensive, as dealing with a single issue about Newark and its history.

*Marc Levin:* What would that not exist? Just dealing with Newark? No, look-

*Robert Curvin:* I think you underestimate the power of what you've done.

*Marc Levin:* Oh, no, I mean, I'm just saying that I think again, it's like in my mind, and of course, we've made it but it's not seeing it in the context, the context being what's in the newspaper, what's on television, what's on talk shows, what's normally about Newark. And now this. Now, you can tell me, you and the families that you think this is just more of the same, you know, I don't feel that way at all, that it's the another local news report, like every other news, local news report that's on when somebody's shot or whatever. But- and I will show you the evidence from around the country of how people have responded to this, both critically.

And just in Facebook, social, you know, emails, Twitters, all of that. It's, you know, been overwhelming the positive response and the feedback of how this thing has touched people. So, again, Newarkers are very, inside the picture, I certainly understand, like, you've not mentioned a number of scenes that, you know, could people could object to, but the overall five nights, the attention brought to Newark, the opening that you were at, in Newark, you know, when was the last time Newark hosted an event of that kind, all the different people

that were brought together, and the discussion that has been stimulated and paper, I see that as a positive, and I don't see, you know, people running out in Newark.

And, you know, I'll send you, I'll send you what we get, you know, but you know, look, I respect everybody's opinion, and, you know, I've made enough films to know that every film I've done, including this one, you know, it's got its critics, and it's- and people see it differently. It's the nature of the thing, but I would say in this, you know, this comes as close as I've seen to having, you know, a solid 70 to 80% of the response and the feedback being, you know, wow, I was moved, I was touched. I look at it a little differently, I feel a little differently.

*Robert Curvin:* But seeing the differences and racial perceptions of the reaction.

*Marc Levin:* That's hard to say because it's hard to identify, you know, just in, you know, in the feedback, you know, who's black, white, Hispanic, it's hard. It's hard to know, I don't know.

*Robert Curvin:* One of the- I don't know if you saw the Washington Post review, but I think I did. The writer says at one point, that when in scene one, when it opens up with Cory jogging, but that the the- the video is of the mayor jogging past crime scenes, which is, you know, people make things up.

*Marc Levin:* No. Well, that's what it's changed. In other words, the mayor says in that voice over that one day I ran around, you know, maybe it was McCobb. But I ran by where some of the worst crimes in Newark happen that isn't his voice over. That isn't his voice. So, so that's, that's where they got that from. Obviously, he's not running by-

*Robert Curvin:* Running past crime scenes.

*Marc Levin:* Right. But he does mention that. And so that's not totally out of left field. But look, Bob, this thing, what's so interesting about it, and you have invested, you know, a good part of your life and now you're writing this book. It's, it's, it's stim- stimulated and blown, you know, a lot of conversation. We know, you know, some of its negative, we respect it. We feel we can do more, but I would say overall, I just personally, as you know, executive producer and director, don't accept that it's civic pornography, don't accept that. It's a black mark on Newark. Don't accept that. Ultimately, it's a negative for Newark. I see it, obviously differently. But you know, we just have to go forward and see.

[End of Audio]